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The Rhetoric of Romanticism

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Autobiography As De-Facement

THE THEORY of autobiography is plagued by a recurrent series of questions and approaches that are not simply false, in the sense that they are farfetched or aberrant, but that are confining, in that they take for granted assumptions about autobiographical discourse that are in fact highly problematic. They keep therefore being stymied, with predictable monotony, by sets of problems that are inherent in their own use. One of these problems is the attempt to define and to treat autobiography as if it were a literary genre among others. Since the concept of genre designates an aesthetic as well as a historical function, what is at stake is not only the distance that shelters the author of autobiography from his experience but the possible convergence of aesthetics and of history. The investment in such a convergence, especially when autobiography is concerned, is considerable. By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest one, among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres. This does not go without some embarrassment, since compared to tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-in-

dulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values. Whatever the reason may be, autobiography makes matters worse by responding poorly to this elevation in status. Attempts at generic definition seem to founder in questions that are both pointless and unanswerable. Can there be autobiography before the eighteenth century or is it a specifically preromantic and romantic phenomenon? Generic historians tend to think so, which raises at once the question of the autobiographical element in Augustine's *Confessions*, a question which, despite some valiant recent efforts, is far from resolved. Can autobiography be written in verse? Even some of the most recent theoreticians of autobiography categorically deny the possibility though without giving reasons why this is so. Thus it becomes irrelevant to consider Wordsworth's *The Prelude* within the context of a study of autobiography, an exclusion that anyone working in the English tradition will find hard to condone. Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.

Another recurrent attempt at specific circumscription, certainly more fruitful than generic classification though equally undecisive, confronts the distinction between autobiography and fiction. Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name: the narrator of Rousseau's *Confessions* seems to be defined by the name and by the signature of Rousseau in a more universal manner than

is the case, by Rousseau's own avowal, for *Julie*. But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model? We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? Gérard Genette puts the question very correctly in a footnote to his discussion of figuration in Proust. He comments on a particularly apt articulation between two patterns of figuration—the example being the image of flowers and of insects used in describing the encounter between Charlus and Jupien. This is an effect of what Genette calls a "concommitance" (right *timing*) of which it is impossible to say whether it is fact or fiction. For, says Genette, "it suffices to locate oneself [as reader] outside the text (*before* it) to be able to say that the timing has been manipulated in order to produce the *metaphor*. Only a situation supposed to have been forced upon the author from the outside, by history, or by the tradition, and thus (for him) not fictional . . . imposes upon the reader the hypothesis of a *genetic* causality in which the metonymy functions as cause and the metaphor as effect, and *not* the *teleological* causality in which the metaphor is the end *(fin)* and the metonymy the means toward this end, a structure which is always possible within a hypothetically pure fiction. It goes without saying, in the case of Proust, that each example taken from the *Recherche* can produce, on this level, an endless discussion between a reading of the novel as fiction and a reading of the same novel as au-

tobiography. We should perhaps remain *within* this whirligig *(tourniquet)*."[1]

It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable. But is it possible to remain, as Genette would have it, *within* an undecidable situation? As anyone who has ever been caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous. A system of differentiation based on two elements that, in Wordsworth's phrase, "of these [are] neither, and [are] both at once" is not likely to be sound.

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be *by* someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.

But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be. The difficulties of generic definition that affect the study of autobiography repeat an inherent instability that undoes the model as soon as it is established. Genette's metaphor of the revolving door helps us to understand why this is so: it aptly connotes the turning motion of tropes and confirms that the specular moment is not primarily a situation or an event that can be located in a history, but that it is the

manifestation, on the level of the referent, of a linguistic structure. The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self. The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions.

For just as autobiographies, by their thematic insistence on the subject, on the proper name, on memory, on birth, eros, and death, and on the doubleness of specularity, openly declare their cognitive and tropological constitution, they are equally eager to escape from the coercions of this system. Writers *of* autobiographies as well as writers *on* autobiography are obsessed by the need to move from cognition to resolution and to action, from speculative to political and legal authority. Philippe Lejeune, for example, whose works deploy all approaches to autobiography with such thoroughness that it becomes exemplary, stubbornly insists—and I call his insistence stubborn because it does not seem to be founded in argument or evidence—that the identity of autobiography is not only representational and cognitive but contractual, grounded not in tropes but in speech acts. The name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable of self-knowledge and understanding, but the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological, authority. The fact that Lejeune uses "proper name" and "signature" interchangeably signals both the confusion and the complexity of the problem. For just as it is impossible for him to stay within the tropological system of the name and just as he has to move from ontological identity to contractual promise, as soon as the performative function is asserted, it is at once reinscribed within cognitive constraints. From specular figure of the author, the reader becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the signature and the consistency of the signer's behavior, the extent to which he respects or fails

to honor the contractual agreement he has signed. The transcendental authority had at first to be decided between author and reader, or (what amounts to the same), between the author *of* the text and the author *in* the text who bears his name. This specular pair has been replaced by the signature of a single subject no longer folded back upon itself in mirror-like self-understanding. But Lejeune's way of reading, as well as his theoretical elaborations, show that the reader's attitude toward this contractual "subject" (which is in fact no longer a subject at all) is again one of transcendental authority that allows him to pass judgment. The specular structure has been displaced but not overcome, and we reenter a system of tropes at the very moment we claim to escape from it. The study of autobiography is caught in this double motion, the necessity to escape from the tropology of the subject and the equally inevitable reinscription of this necessity within a specular model of cognition. I propose to illustrate this abstraction by reading an exemplary autobiographical text, Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*.[2]

We are not only considering the first of these three essays, which Wordsworth also included as a footnote to Book VII of the *Excursion*, but the sequence of three consecutive essays written presumably in 1810, which appeared in *The Friend*. It requires no lengthy argument to stress the autobiographical components in a text which turns compulsively from an essay *upon* epitaphs to being itself an epitaph and, more specifically, the author's own monumental inscription or autobiography. The essays quote numerous epitaphs taken from a variety of sources, commonplace books such as John Weever's *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, which dates from 1631, as well as high literary instances composed by Gray or by Pope. But Wordsworth ends up with a quotation from his own works, a passage from the *Excursion* inspired by the epitaph and the life of one Thomas Holme. It tells, in the starkest of languages, the story of a deaf man who compensates for his infirmity by substituting the reading of books for the sounds of nature.

The general plot of the story, strategically placed as the exemplary conclusion of an exemplary text, is very familiar to readers of *The Prelude*. It tells of a discourse that is *sustained* beyond and in spite of *deprivation* which, as in this case, may be an accident of birth or which can occur as a sudden shock, at times catastrophical, at times apparently trivial. The shock interrupts a state of affairs that was relatively stable. One thinks of such famous passages in *The Prelude* as the hymn to the newborn child in Book II ("Bless'd the infant babe . . .") that tells how "the first / Poetic spirit of our human life" manifests itself. A condition of mutual exchange and dialogue is first established, then interrupted without warning when "the props of my affections were remov'd" and restored when it is said that ". . . the building stood, as if sustain'd / By its own spirit!" (II.294–96). Or one thinks of the drowned man in Book V who " 'mid that beauteous scene / Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright / Rose, with his ghastly face, a spectre shape / Of terror even" (V.470–73); Wordsworth reports that the nine-year-old boy he was at the time found solace in the thought that he had previously encountered such scenes in books. And one thinks most of all of the equally famous episode that almost immediately precedes this scene, the Boy of Winander. Numerous verbal echoes link the passage from the *Excursion* quoted at the end of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* to the story of the boy whose mimic mirth is interrupted by a sudden silence prefigurative of his own death and subsequent restoration. As is well known, it is this episode which furnishes, in an early variant, the textual evidence for the assumption that these figures of deprivation, maimed men, drowned corpses, blind beggars, children about to die, that appear throughout *The Prelude* are figures of Wordsworth's own poetic self. They reveal the autobiographical dimension that all these texts have in common. But the question remains how this near-obsessive concern with mutilation, often in the form of a loss of one of the senses, as blindness, deafness, or, as in the key word of the Boy of Winander, *muteness*, is to be understood and, consequently, how trustworthy the ensuing claim

of compensation and restoration can be. The question has further bearing on the relationship of these tales to other episodes in *The Prelude* which also involve shocks and interruptions, but occur in a mood of sublimity in which the condition of deprivation is no longer clearly apparent. This takes us, of course, beyond the scope of this paper; I must limit myself to suggesting the relevance of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* for the larger question of autobiographical discourse as a discourse of self-restoration.

Wordsworth's claim for restoration in the face of death, in the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, is grounded in a consistent system of thought, of metaphors, and of diction that is announced at the beginning of the first essay and developed throughout. It is a system of mediations that converts the radical distance of an either/or opposition in a process allowing movement from one extreme to the other by a series of transformations that leave the negativity of the initial relationship (or lack of relationship) intact. One moves, without compromise, from death *or* life to life *and* death. The existential poignancy of the text stems from the full acquiescence to the power of mortality; no simplification in the form of a negation of the negation can be said to take place in Wordsworth. The text constructs a sequence of mediations between incompatibles: city and nature, pagan and Christian, particularity and generality, body and grave, brought together under the general principle according to which "origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative." Nietzsche will say the exactly symmetrical opposite in the *Genealogy of Morals*—"origin and tendency *(Zweck)* [are] two problems that are not and should not be linked"—and historians of romanticism and of post-romanticism have had little difficulty using the system of this symmetry to unite this origin (Wordsworth) with this tendency (Nietzsche) in a single historical itinerary. The same itinerary, the same image of the road, appears in the text as "the lively and affecting analogies of life as a journey" interrupted, but not ended, by death. The large, overarching metaphor for this entire system is that of the sun in motion: "As, in sailing upon the orb of this planet,

a voyage towards the regions where the sun sets, conducts gradually to the quarter where we have been accustomed to behold it come forth at its rising; and, in like manner, a voyage toward the east, the birth-place in our imagination of the morning, leads finally to the quarter where the sun is last seen when he departs from our eyes; so the contemplative Soul, travelling in the direction of mortality, advances to the country of everlasting life; and, in like manner, may she continue to explore those cheerful tracts, till she is brought back, for her advantage and benefit, to the land of transitory things—of sorrow and of tears." In this system of metaphors, the sun is more than a mere natural object, although it is powerful enough, as such, to command a chain of images that can see a man's work as a tree, made of trunks and branches, and language as akin to "the power of gravitation or the air we breathe" (p. 154), the parousia of light. Relayed by the trope of light, the sun becomes a figure of knowledge as well as of nature, the emblem of what the third essay refers to as "the mind with absolute sovereignty upon itself." Knowledge and mind imply language and account for the relationship set up between the sun and the text of the epitaph: the epitaph, says Wordsworth, "is open to the day; the sun looks down upon the stone, and the rains of heaven beat against it." The sun becomes the eye that *reads* the text of the epitaph. And the essay tells us what this text consists of, by way of a quotation from Milton that deals with Shakespeare: "What need'st thou such weak witness of thy *name?*" In the case of poets such as Shakespeare, Milton, or Wordsworth himself, the epitaph can consist only of what he calls "the naked name" (p. 133), as it is read by the eye of the sun. At this point, it can be said of "the language of the senseless stone" that it acquires a "voice," the *speaking* stone counterbalancing the *seeing* sun. The system passes from sun to eye to language as name and as voice. We can identify the figure that completes the central metaphor of the sun and thus completes the tropological spectrum that the sun engenders: it is the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which

posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech. Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope's name, *prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face *(prosopon)*. Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name, as in the Milton poem, is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration.

From a rhetorical point of view, the *Essays upon Epitaphs* are a treatise on the superiority of prosopopeia (associated with the names of Milton and of Shakespeare) over antithesis (associated with the name of Pope). In terms of style and narrative diction, prosopopeia is also the art of delicate transition (a feat easier to perform in autobiography than in epic narrative). The gradual transformations occur in such a way that "feelings [that] seem opposite to each other have another and finer connection than that of contrast." The stylistics of epitaph are very remote from the "unmeaning antitheses" of satire; they proceed instead by gliding displacements, by, says Wordsworth, "smooth gradation or gentle transition, to some other kindred quality," "kept within the circle of qualities which range themselves quietly by each other's sides." Metaphor and prosopopeia bring together a thematic pathos with a subtly differentiated diction. It reaches, in Wordsworth, the triumph of an autobiographical narrative grounded in a genuine dialectic, which is also the most encompassing system of tropes conceivable.

Yet, despite the perfect closure of the system, the text contains elements that not only disrupt its balance but its principle of production. We saw that the name, be it the proper name of the author or of a place, is an essential link in the chain. But in the striking passage that illustrates the unity of origin and of destination through the metaphor of a flowing river, Wordsworth insists that, whereas the literal sense of the dead figure may indeed be, as in Milton's poem on Shakespeare, a name, "an image gathered from a map, or from the

real object in nature," "the spirit . . . [on the other hand] must have been *as* inevitably,—a receptacle without bounds or dimensions;—nothing less than infinity." The opposition between literal and figural functions here by analogy with the opposition between the name and the nameless, although it is the burden of the entire argument to overcome this very opposition.

The quotation from Milton is remarkable in still another respect. It omits six lines from the original, which is certainly legitimate enough, yet revealing with regard to another, more puzzling, anomaly in the text. The dominant figure of the epitaphic or autobiographical discourse is, as we saw, the prosopopeia, the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave; an unlettered stone would leave the sun suspended in nothingness. Yet at several points throughout the three essays, Wordsworth cautions consistently against the use of prosopopeia, against the convention of having the "Sta Viator" addressed to the traveler on the road of life by the voice of the departed person. Such chiasmic figures, crossing the conditions of death and of life with the attributes of speech and of silence are, says Wordsworth, "too poignant and too transitory"—a curiously phrased criticism, since the very movement of the consolation is that of the transitory and since it is the poignancy of the weeping "silent marble," as in Gray's epitaph on Mrs. Clark, for which the essays strive. Whenever prosopopeia is discussed, and it recurs at least three times, the argument becomes singularly inconclusive. "Representing [the deceased] as speaking from his own tomb-stone" is said to be a "tender fiction," a "shadowy interposition [which] harmoniously unites the two worlds of the living and the dead . . . ," everything, in other words, that the thematics and the stylistics of the autobiographical theme set out to accomplish. Yet, in the next paragraph, it is said that "the latter mode, namely, that in which the survivors speak in *their own* persons, seems to me upon the whole greatly preferable" because "it excludes the fiction which is the groundwork of the other" (p. 132). Gray and Milton are chided for what are in fact figurations derived

from prosopopeia. The text counsels against the use of its own main figure. Whenever this happens, it indicates the threat of a deeper logical disturbance.

The omissions from the Milton sonnet offer one way to account for the threat. In the elided six lines Milton speaks of the burden that Shakespeare's "easy numbers" represent for those who are, like all of us, capable only of "slow-endeavoring art." He then goes on to say

> Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving
> Dost make us marble with too much conceiving.

Isabel MacCaffrey paraphrases the two difficult lines as follows: "our imaginations are rapt 'out of ourselves' leaving behind our soulless bodies like statues." "Doth make us marble," in the *Essays upon Epitaphs,* cannot fail to evoke the latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death. The surmise of the "Pause, Traveller!" thus acquires a sinister connotation that is not only the prefiguration of one's own mortality but our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead. It could be argued that Wordsworth's awareness of this threat is clear-eyed enough to allow for its inscription within the cognitive, solar system of specular self-knowledge that underlies the essays, and that the warnings against the use of prosopopeia are strategic and didactic rather than actual. He knows that the advocated "exclusion" of the fictional voice and its replacement by the actual voice of the living in fact reintroduces the prosopopeia in the fiction of *address.* Nevertheless, the fact that this statement is made by ways of omissions and contradictions rightly awakens one's suspicions.

The main inconsistency of the text, which is also the source of its considerable theoretical importance, occurs in a related but different pattern. The *Essays* speak out forcefully against the antithetical language of satire and invective and plead eloquently for a lucid language of repose, tranquillity, and serenity. Yet, if we ask the legitimate question which of the two prevail in this text, the mode of aggression or of repose, it is clear that the essays contain large portions that are most openly antithetical and aggressive. "I cannot suffer any Individual, however highly and deservedly honoured by my Countrymen, to stand in my way"; this reference to Pope, together with many others addressed to the same, are anything but gentle. Wordsworth is sufficiently bothered by the discrepancy—it *is* a discrepancy, for there is no reason in the world why Pope could not have been handled with the same dialectical generosity accorded to death—to generate an abundant discourse of self-justification that spills over into a redundantly insistent Appendix. The most violent language is saved however, not for Alexander Pope, but for language itself. A certain misuse of language is denounced in the strongest of terms: "Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not . . . an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely they will prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit . . ." (p. 154). What is the characteristic of the language so severely condemned? The distinction between total good and radical evil rests on the distinction between incarnate thought and "a clothing for thought," two notions which seem indeed to "have another and a finer connection than that of contrast." De Quincey singled out this distinction and read it as a way to oppose compelling figures to arbitrary ones. But incarnate flesh and clothing have at least one property in common, in opposition to the thoughts they both represent, namely their visibility, their accessibility to the senses. A little earlier in the passage, Wordsworth has similarly characterized the *right* kind of language as being "not what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul" (p. 154). The sequence garb—

body—soul is in fact a perfectly consistent metaphorical chain: garment is the visible outside of the body as the body is the visible outside of the soul. The language so violently denounced is in fact the language of metaphor, of prosopopeia and of tropes, the solar language of cognition that makes the unknown accessible to the mind and to the senses. The language of tropes (which is the specular language of autobiography) is indeed like the body, which is like its garments, the veil of the soul as the garment is the sheltering veil of the body. How can this harmless veil then suddenly become as deadly and violent as the poisoned coat of Jason or of Nessus?

The coat of Nessus, which caused the violent death of Hercules, as narrated in Sophocles' *Trachiniae,* was given to his wife Deianeira, in the hope of regaining the affections from which she would soon be deprived. It was supposed to restore the love which she lost, but the restoration turned out to be a worse deprivation, a loss of life and of sense. The passage from the *Excursion* that concludes the *Essays* tells a similar story, though not to the end. The deafness of the "gentle Dalesman" who is the protagonist of the tale finds its outside equivalent, by a consistent enough crossing, in the muteness of a nature of which it is said that, even at the height of the storm, it is "silent as a picture." To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute. Language, as trope, is always privative. Wordsworth says of evil language, which is in fact all language including his own language of restoration, that it works "unremittingly and *noiselessly*" (p. 154). To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are, like the Dalesman in the *Excursion,* deaf and mute—not silent, which implies the possible manifestation of sound at our own will, but silent as a picture, that is to say eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness. No wonder that the Dalesman takes so readily to books and finds such solace in them, since for him the outside world has in fact always been a book, a succession of voiceless tropes. As soon as we

understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.